

India's Nuclear Doctrine is Robust and requires no Review

by Brig. Arun Sahgal (Retd.), Senior Fellow, Delhi Policy Group

"Western nuclear analysts appear to have wrongly interpreted these suggestions as a major doctrinal shift in terms of India moving away from its stated doctrine of NFU and massive retaliation to a possible pre-emptive strike in certain circumstances. ..."



At the recently held 2017 Carnegie International Nuclear Policy Conference¹, the issue reportedly at centre stage was whether India was tweaking its declared nuclear doctrine based on "No First Use" (NFU) backed by massive retaliation, by a pre-emptive strike doctrine in the face of an imminent nuclear strike by an adversary.

This claim was linked to the former Indian National Security Adviser Shivshankar Menon's purported statement in his recent book that India's nuclear doctrine has a potential grey area in regard to the use of nuclear weapons against another NWS (nuclear weapons state). Menon has articulated that circumstances are conceivable in which India might find it useful to strike first if India was certain that an adversary's nuclear weapon launch was imminent.

These views, coming against the backdrop of remarks of former Indian Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar contending (in his personal capacity) that India should make its nuclear policy ambiguous by not declaring whether it has NFU policy, have understandably generated speculation. This is especially so as these remarks have also been read in conjunction with an earlier contention of Lt. Gen. B.S. Nagal, the former Commander in Chief of Indian Strategic Forces, wherein he questioned the NFU doctrine by positing whether it was possible for India's leadership to accept massive casualties by restraining its hand while well knowing that Pakistan was about to use nuclear weapons against India.

Western nuclear analysts appear to have wrongly interpreted these suggestions as a major doctrinal shift in terms of India moving away from its stated doctrine of NFU and massive retaliation to a possible pre-emptive strike in certain circumstances. Their apparent logic is that were India to make a determination of the imminence of a nuclear strike by Pakistan in a conventionally adverse situation, India will not hesitate to pre-empt this by its own counterforce strike aimed at taking out Pakistan's deployed nuclear systems.

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Ambassador Hemant Krishan Singh
Director General

These speculative contentions and their interpretation raise two fundamental issues. One, that there is a shifting belief in the Indian nuclear establishment about the viability of India's NFU-based nuclear doctrine. Even more importantly, that pre-emption under circumstances of imminent nuclear weapon use by an adversary is a preferred Indian option.

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So it is necessary to carefully examine the validity of these claims and presumptions and to set the record straight.

India's declared nuclear doctrine is based on the concept of NFU backed by a policy of assured massive retaliation. The overall aim is to convince any potential aggressor that:

- a. Threat or use of nuclear weapons against India shall involve measures to counter the threat; and
- b. Any nuclear attack on India and its forces anywhere shall result in massive retaliation, inflicting unacceptable damage to the aggressor.

Following from the above it is clear that the Indian doctrine is based on the concept of deterrence by denial. This in turn implies that the adversary is put on notice that use of nuclear weapons will imply massive retaliation. The doctrine purposely leaves vague the nature of retaliation and even what constitutes "massive".

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In other words, the doctrinal rationale is to send a clear message to the Military-led Pakistani NCA (Nuclear Command Authority) to be assured of Indian retaliation.

More importantly, it makes no distinction regarding the nature of nuclear weapons used against India, be they tactical or strategic, leaving no chance of misperception on the part of the adversary. It is further implied that once nuclear deterrence breaks down, all bets are off.

Therefore, the core logic of the Indian doctrine lies in dissuading the potential use of nuclear weapons by adversaries, and not as

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In a number of Strategic Gaming Exercises in which the author has been a participant, both with Pakistani and other

foreign interlocutors, in critical contingencies there is a great degree of posturing about shallow thresholds, but seldom has the Pakistani side ventured to proceed towards actual use of nuclear weapons.

Yet another aspect is that given the credibility of vastly improved Indian ISR capabilities, Indian decision makers will be armed with a fair degree of warning about Pakistani deployments, as indeed the Pakistani side would be ably assisted in this regard by its "all weather friend" the Chinese. Thus a state of advanced or even hair trigger alert is going to prevail when any such pre-emptive use would be contemplated. This means that in the event of deterrence breakdown by either side, there would be an immediate response.

Strike calculations based on simulations highlight that it is virtually impossible to take out all nuclear weapons through a pre-emptive strike, more so in the case of India and Pakistan where precision strikes are constrained by the accuracies of geo-reference systems. Under the circumstances, a "launch on warning" type of pre-emptive strike to degrade the opponent's nuclear capability would be reckless and foolhardy to say the least.

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Given the aforementioned logic, any political countenance of a massive pre-emptive strike is unlikely and runs the risk of uncontrolled escalation. Cold war history points out that pretensions of massive strikes to preempt a Soviet Union attack on continental USA would

have resulted in massive Russian retaliation engulfing

the entire European Continent in radioactive clouds. The efficacy of a credible pre-emptive strike is too much of a chance unless the country concerned is prepared for an all out nuclear war. It is to be hoped that such a chance neither the Indian nor the Pakistani leadership are likely to take.

“... the Indian NFU doctrine is robust, credible and dissuasive enough to prevent an adversary from acting with reckless abandon. ...”

It follows, therefore, that the Indian NFU doctrine is robust, credible and dissuasive enough to prevent an adversary from acting with reckless abandon. The author having participated in nuclear dialogues with Pakistani generals for last

five years can state with a fair degree of certainty that the cold logic applies in their calculations, not impulsiveness.

In short, these misplaced presumptions or assumptions of Indian doctrinal changes are speculative at best and not based on any deep analysis

“India's nuclear doctrine is both robust and credible, requiring no change or review. ...”

or functional understanding of the core beliefs underlying the Indian NFU posture. India's nuclear doctrine is both robust and credible, requiring no change or review.

Reference:

¹ *The 2017 Carnegie International Nuclear Policy Conference held on March 20 and 21, 2017 at the [Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center](#) in Washington, DC.*



Delhi Policy Group

Core 5A, First Floor, India Habitat Centre
Lodhi Road, New Delhi 110003
Phone: +91 11 48202100
Website: www.delhipolicygroup.org
Email: dg@dpg.org.in; dgoffice@dpg.org.in

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